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UNCLAS SAN JOSE 000553

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Armed Robbers Target Tourists Near Airport

1. SUMMARY. Eleven armed robberies of tourists near the San Jose airport took place during a recent eight week period. It appears one group of four armed males is responsible. Post approached the GOCCR, tourism officials and the AmCham in support of greater protection for tourists and an in-depth investigation of the robberies. The last reported robbery was on Feb. 21. END SUMMARY.

2. Theft, of luggage/purses/backpacks, is a daily reality for the 700,000+ AmCit visitors to Costa Rica each year. Tourists are easy prey, and are targeted in rental vehicles, at bus stations and on the beaches. Post learns of the thefts, in most instances, only if passports are taken - in FY-05 we replaced 1,558 stolen passports, the largest number reported by any FS post. Until recently, few robberies have involved weapons or violence.

3. Since December 21, there have been at least eleven armed robberies of tourists, under similar circumstances, on the main highway west of San Jose. Most of the victims were recent arrivals at Juan Santamaria International airport, and all were driving on the PanAmerican highway between 2230 and 0100. Eight cases involved AmCits, two victims were Dutch citizens and another British. All the robberies appear to be the work of one group of four males. In each case, the robbers pulled alongside or in front of the vehicle carrying the tourists, forcing the car to the side of the highway. Several of the victims report gunshots fired at the tires. Once the car was disabled, three armed and hooded males commandeered the blocked vehicle, and within a few minutes took luggage and personal possessions. At least one of the robbers spoke English.

4. The first case occurred on December 21, the next on January 7, followed by an average of more than one robbery a week in late January until February 21. We presume there have been more than eleven incidents. The robbers warn the victims not to report the crime, and all but one of the eleven cases involved a stolen passport, meaning the crime had to be reported. Local authorities indicate that at least seven additional robberies fitting the modus operandi were reported to the police during the same time period.

5. From the beginning, the Embassy's Consular Section and RSO have worked to alert Costa Rican authorities to the threat. After the third reported robbery, more concrete steps were taken. A meeting with a past President of the AmCham led to combating crime against tourists being listed as one of the top three goals of AmCham for 2006. Our monthly meetings with tourism safety officials became weekly or twice weekly, with police and Ministerial-level participation by the GOCCR. The Consular Section developed an e-mail list of interested parties, and kept all up to date on events. A meeting with Consuls representing the Dutch, British, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and French Embassies led to information sharing, and the first three listed above strengthened their information sheets to reflect an increase in passport thefts and armed robberies. Post's revisions to Embassy San Jose's CIS (submitted on February 8) are in the clearance process by the Department to add a paragraph on this particular threat.

6. The Costa Rican police are understaffed, and limited by minimal training, inadequate resources and jurisdictional disputes. Nonetheless, they appear to be taking the rash of robberies seriously, beefing up patrols on the highway and establishing a task force to lead the investigation. A senior police official readily admitted that only the intervention and interest of the American Embassy made them realize the interconnection of the various assaults, and the severity of the problem.

7. There have been no similar robberies reported since February 21. We suspect the increased police presence is largely responsible, but also presume the perpetrators will resurface once the heightened security ends, or move to another locale seeking easy prey. We will continue to push the GOCCR to pursue the criminals until all are apprehended. While so far no one has been injured, the presence of loaded handguns makes it highly likely that at some point someone will be shot.

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